LARRY O'CONNOR

## My Listek

A short stay in a Prague hospital may be the best way to learn the notoriously difficult language.

As I HOLD THE WHITE PIECE OF PAPER, I AM CAREFUL not to tug on the intravenous. Centered in bold at the top are the words Jidelní Listek, and arrayed in sections beneath in the following order: Snídaně, Oběd and Večeře. Of course, it is all in Czech except for the word "cornflakes." I have been in Prague before this trip and know that accents and punctuation change the sound and meaning of words, so I dare not try to even attempt to pronounce them. On my first morning in Cardiology, I don't have the strength to get out of bed. It is also the beginning of the weeklong Czech national holiday.

The admitting doctor, who spoke English, didn't mince words. "You have a blood clot in the calf of your leg," he said. "Deep vein thrombosis. We will admit you immediately, and attach you to a bag of anti-clotting medicine. You are lucky, this is a hospital that is very good at treating this condition." The price was certainly right: \$35 a night for a private room, less than the apartment we'd rented off Kampa Island. But no one has spoken a word of English to me since.

Certainly jogurt is yogurt, I think. Džus, I imagine because it is in a column with voda (water), may very well be juice. There are boxes to the left of each item on the single sheet of letter-size paper. Could Snidane be breakfast? But if so, then there are five courses, with seven choices in the first course, twelve in the second, eight in the next, ten in the penultimate, and five in the last one. Forty-two in all. I turn to my Czech phrase book, where these words do not appear. Perhaps, then, the Jidelni Listek isn't a menu at all.

I shift in bed and the pain in my leg is excruciating. Hopefully, I think, the admitting doctor has included in my record that my clots have a tendency to travel. Twenty-five years ago I had my first blood clot—and it traveled to my lung and nearly killed me. I have no way of knowing that this isn't happening to me now.

I expect a doctor to come by. Or a nurse who will give me some comfort, a sense that this hospital is a good one. So far, I am not convinced. For the national holiday, the admitting doctor said, the hospital is half-staffed. Even the patients who aren't so sick, go home.

One nurse, who changed my blood-thinner IV, left it leaking in the bed frame. For an hour, they couldn't connect the drip. Earlier, another nurse ate an ice cream cone the color of the brown pigeon I could see on a nearby roof while her colleague changed the dressing on my leg. I winced as she roughly undid the bandage, slathered goop from a white plastic bucket onto my throbbing calf. They paid me no further attention, and left.

Maybe this listek was put there by mistake, I think. I have been studying it for an hour now and no one has yet come to take it from me. The word voda comes up four times. It's a questionnaire, perhaps. Is the water closet acceptable? The drinking water in the fountains? The mineral baths? Or a municipal assessment. Check here to pay the water tax. Perhaps I am to check yes or no, for the special levy on a new

sewage treatment plant.

I started to become acquainted with the language. There were whole words—common words—that did not possess a single vowel. I could never say the word for "quarter." I used to go to a roast chicken stall for lunch, intending to buy a quarter chicken, and always came away with a half.

—Julie Sheard, "Don't Look Down"

The light streams into my private room as I ponder this. On the wall before me is a poster triptych of the desert. The one on the right has a straggly tree, and the other two suggest the calm after a sandstorm, ocean-like ripples upon rolling hills that within have engulfed countless people in this desolate place.

A blond woman with the hard-bitten look of a

Czech waiter who had pulled the short straw to be stuck working the holiday suddenly appears. In her hand are what seem like a dozen pills: little ones, pink ones, pills the size of a water beetle, capsules. She gives me a glass of water and with a grunt, gestures that I take them all, one at a time. I want to ask her what each is for, but instead fall into the hospital way, and swallow them.

Then she says something to me, pointing to the menu. When I don't respond, her dark eyes flash and she repeats the order, only louder. "I don't understand Czech," I say.

She is average height with a nice figure, but when she scowls she is more bulldog than nurse, tearing at words in medieval spite, like flesh from a boar.

"You stupid man, make the simple marks on the menu. How do you expect to stay alive if you don't eat?"

She slaps the pencil on my *lístek*, and watches as I mark my first breakfast order. I check cornflakes, *džus*, and *chleb* and she grabs the *lístek* and leaves, her white shoes squeaking in retreat.

I fall asleep and when I awake, my breakfast is waiting: a piece of white bread on a dinner plate, a half-fishbowl of dry cornflakes, and a quart carton with a picture of a purple-colored fruit that looks like a prune.

After breakfast, I meet Dr. Hat. He pats an area above his head, and lifts an imaginary brim like Charlie Chaplin did in greeting pretty girls, and then points to his breast. I get it immediately and say, "Pleased to meet you, Dr. Hat," and we shake hands. Then Dr. Hat, a slender, dark-haired man with a stethoscope, looks at my chart, clucks twice, and leaves the room.

I put in phone calls to my doctor in Brooklyn and my sister in Canada, who works in a hospital. I am anxious to hear from them because I have no idea if I am getting good care. Dr. Hat may be the type of physician some friends had in mind when they said this hospital was one of the best in Central Europe. Or he is a Czech Chauncy Gardner, who does rounds on national holidays, amusing the staff.

While waiting to hear back from abroad, I scratch out a sentence in Czech from the restaurant glossary. I had breezed through the sections: At the Airport, Eats and Treats, Checking-In, Getting Around. For hospital visits there is nothing, just *Pokousal mě pes*: I've been bitten by a dog.

I write in block letters, WHERE IS THE BATHROOM? in Czech, then press the buzzer several times. When the blond nurse arrives, I raise the sign before me and, to my surprise, she smiles, shakes her head, and helps me rise, balance on my good leg, and get to the bathroom.

When Dr. Hat begins treatment, he examines my leg closely and orders a nurse to change my IV. There's a pain in my chest and I hope it is only my mind playing tricks on me. Later, he is back again. I am drowsy, my eyes open to slits, as I watch Dr. Hat, dressed in a pressed white lab coat, brown corduroys, and Hush Puppies, before the desert triptych, slightly shaking his head. When the doctor turns, he shrugs his shoulders and raises his open palms in a way that does look like Chauncey Gardner after all.

Dr. Hat hustles me into a wheelchair and pushes me toward the hall. At the doorway, he checks both ways as if to see if the coast is clear, and then he takes me away from the nurses' station to an elevator beyond Cardiology. We see no one in the halls, or in the elevator. I close my eyes and drain the rush of air.

We do tests in a room and again it is only Dr. Hat and I. He bends over me, traces his finger down my leg where the clot is lodged, and the ultrasound machine dings, a cross between a cymbal clatter and a Microsoft boot-up. As he gently squeezes my leg blue and red sparks shimmer on the screen on either side of the clot.

Soon, we are going back. I am more awake, and notice we are in a service elevator, with a mop and pail standing in the corner, a trash barrel. We arrive at the rear of the eighth floor, and Dr. Hat picks up the pace. When the doors burst open, the nurses are standing before my room like girls smoking in the schoolyard. Suddenly, my nurse kneels in mock paparazzi form. The others file in behind as in a press clutch. A grand-motherly type raises her arms as if she had come upon the pope himself pushing the lonely man on the ward and not the illustrious Dr. Hat, who pushes me toward the nurses and slinks away to the sounds of their jeers and hoots.

That evening I am watching Cry the Beloved Country, with

James Earl Jones in the lead role, dubbed in Czech, when my dinner arrives. I have reached my doctor, who said my care sounded exactly right. My sister howled upon hearing of the story of Dr. Hat's return to the ward. Sounds even better than your care the first time, she said. If the pain in the chest persists, tell your doctor. Try not to worry.

Movie night has drawn the few patients who are in the hospital. They sit on orange vinyl cushions with chrome tubing, smoking cigarettes they stub in foil ashtrays. James Earl Jones is on the phone in a cabin that looks like Ponderosa when a young nurse I don't recognize brings me dinner. She puts down the tray and smiles, her eyes twinkling. Before me is a breaded, fried slab the size of two hockey pucks, a heap of succotash with flesh-colored shoots. I cut into the patty, and white cheese goo oozes onto the plate. Not bad, I say, catching the eye of the server, who laughs as she walks away. In a smoke-filled room of Cardiology, I chew and swallow a piece of the most cholesterol-laden meal I have ever seen.

Then, my nurse arrives. Is she going to give me tomorrow's Jidelni Listek already? Unfortunately not. Instead, she pushes aside the half of the meal I didn't eat, then lifts my hospital gown up to my belly and with her other hand that had been hidden, she stabs me above the groin with a four-inchlong needle.

"Dobré noc," the nurse says, wishing me a good night's sleep.

"Dobré noc," I say.

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